

# **Illinois CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates)**

## **A SAFE, PERMANENT HOME ISN'T SOMETHING A CHILD SHOULD ONLY DREAM ABOUT**

### **FACT SHEET**

CASA volunteers are officers of the court and appointed by a judge to serve as a special advocate to a child adjudicated as abused and/or neglected. A CASA or guardian ad litem advocates for the purpose of representing the child's best interest.

In 2002, 27,338 children were indicated for abuse and neglect in Illinois. In 2002, 73 children were killed in Illinois as a result of either abuse or neglect. In 2002, 23,382 children were in substitute, or foster care in the state of Illinois.

Out of 102 counties in Illinois, only 32 counties currently receive CASA services.

In FY03, 3,871 child victims of abuse and/or neglect received CASA services in Illinois.

These services were provided by 1,460 volunteers who provided 168,671 hours of service to the children they advocated for. Using \$70.00 per hour as a common amount that a court appointed Guardian Ad Litem might bill the court, this is the service equivalent of \$11,806,970.

A child abuse case can last a year or longer, until a decision is made for a permanent home. The CASA volunteer is an advocate for the child during the entire time. Research suggests that CASA volunteers strongly influence a child's length of stay in foster care, in moving the court process more quickly and in permanency planning.

In Illinois, CASA volunteers attend a 40-hour training before they can be a child's advocate in court.

CASA programs are locally supported through the United Way, fundraisers, annual membership and donation drives, foundation and other grant sources.

Illinois CASA and the 29 local CASA programs in Illinois belong to National CASA. National CASA is in the process of implementing a Quality Assurance Project aimed at achieving overall excellence in service for the children that we serve.

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#### **Frequently Asked Questions about Court Appointed Special Advocates**

**What is a CASA volunteer?** A CASA volunteer is an officer of the court. A judge appoints a special advocate to represent the best interest of an abused or neglected child in court proceedings.

**What does a CASA volunteer do?** A trained CASA volunteer gathers information for the court. He or she recommends to the judge what the child needs to be safe and what is in the child's best interest for a safe, nurturing and permanent home. A CASA volunteer advocates for an appropriate decision that is made in a timely manner.

**Why does a child need a CASA volunteer?** When the court is making decisions that will affect a child's future, the child needs and deserves a spokesperson- an objective adult to provide independent information about the best interests of the child. While other parties in the case are concerned about the child, they also have other interests. The CASA is the only person in the case whose sole concern is the best interest of the child. CASA volunteers are assigned one case at a time. One CASA per each child, to provide that child with a "voice in court". A CASA gives individual attention to each case.

An abused or neglected child has come from a world of chaos and instability. For the child, there is fear. Fear of being hurt; fear of being alone and fear about the future. For the children who are in out-of-home placements, there can be many changes in schools and homes before a decision is made in regard to where the child should be placed. A CASA volunteer can be the sole source of stability in the child's life. A CASA is a trusted, dependable adult who doesn't go away and who gives the child hope for a better future. This, then, is an opportunity to benefit our most vulnerable children, those who have been abused and neglected.

**What is the difference between the CASA and a Social Worker?** The roles are not the same. The CASA is independent from the social services system and focuses solely on the child. The DCFS caseworker serves the entire family -parents and child- by providing direct services. DCFS caseworkers are not able to be a wholly independent voice because they are part of an agency that has already taken a position in the case by

filing a petition and bringing the matter to court. A CASA is an independent voice, advocating on behalf of one particular child.

**Why does a child need both a CASA volunteer and an attorney?** A CASA volunteer is able to spend as much time as is necessary to gather information about the child and the child's familial system. A CASA serves at the request of a judge and provides a report on the best placement for a child. If a court had to pay an attorney to do this job, it would be too costly. A child's attorney provides legal representation. The CASA volunteer and the child's attorney can work as a team to represent the best interest of the child.

**Why do CASA programs cost money to run, when volunteers are not paid?** CASA programs hire staff to manage the program and supervise volunteers. Program costs include: salaries, office support, computers and equipment, travel and training. CASA program staff recruit, train and supervise volunteers to ensure quality services. National CASA has program standards that all CASA programs are required to meet.

**Why is state funding needed?** CASA is seeking partial support from the state for Illinois CASA and the 29 local CASA programs throughout Illinois. In order to provide quality services with adequate staffing and to expand to meet the needs of children in Illinois, additional funds are needed.

**Does the court listen to what a CASA has to say?** Judges know their decisions are only as good as the information they receive. They count on CASA volunteers to be an independent voice and they know that CASA volunteers have more time to focus on specific cases. A CASA who can tell the court "I was there- this is what I observed" can be invaluable.

**How do we know CASA volunteers are effective?** Studies have shown CASA volunteers to be effective in reducing court costs, reducing stays in foster care and even in reducing rates of delinquency. A study conducted by the National CASA Association showed that children with a CASA volunteer spent approximately one year less in care than a child without a CASA. This represents a savings to taxpayers and it also means that a child finds a permanent and safe home more quickly.

**What difference will state funding make for Illinois CASA?** The funding will assist children in Illinois in the following ways:

- \*Maintain quality CASA volunteer services to the current number of children in the court system due to abuse and neglect.

- \*Provide quality CASA volunteer services to a waiting list of children in the court system due to abuse and neglect.

- \*Help expand CASA volunteer services to other counties in the state.